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Repatriating the Archives with Digital Humanities

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Introduction

Building Shared Futures from Photographic Remains: Kenyan Visual Heritage and Urban Life aims to improve access to Bristol Archives' British Empire and Commonwealth collections (facilitating digital repatriation) and to foster co-production with academics and communities in Nairobi and beyond, with the objective of equipping Kenyans to reappropriate the materials to tell the histories of their communities.

An important but problematic archive

The collections are important because they are not an official archive produced by the colonial state, but represent the personal and working lives of men and women from Britain who worked across the territories of the British Empire as sojourners for longer or shorter periods of time. This is a large collection, hosting 500,000 photographs, 2,000 films and an extensive range of archival material.

The collections are problematic because they largely represent the perspective of the coloniser and what has been termed a 'colonial gaze'. They are underused because the collection, formerly in the care of the now-closed British Empire and Commonwealth Museum, was inadequately catalogued and inaccessible. Bristol Archives is undertaking a major programme of cataloguing and digitisation, and aims to support imaginative reuse of this resource. In many instances this might be the only gaze that survives; we aim to repurpose it.



Bristol Archives, 2001/090/1/5/1/15 and 2001/090/1/1/8323

Co-production

Building Shared Futures is a collaboration between the University of Bristol, Bristol Archives, University of Nairobi, Technical University of Nairobi, Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology and National Museums of Kenya. The project has held workshops in Bristol and Nairobi where archivists, anthropologists, architects, historians, literary critics, community activists, technologists and a mix of academics, practitioners and experts in co-production and heritage met to discuss the collections, and explore how the various parties could work together to equip Kenyans to reappropriate the materials to tell the histories of their communities.

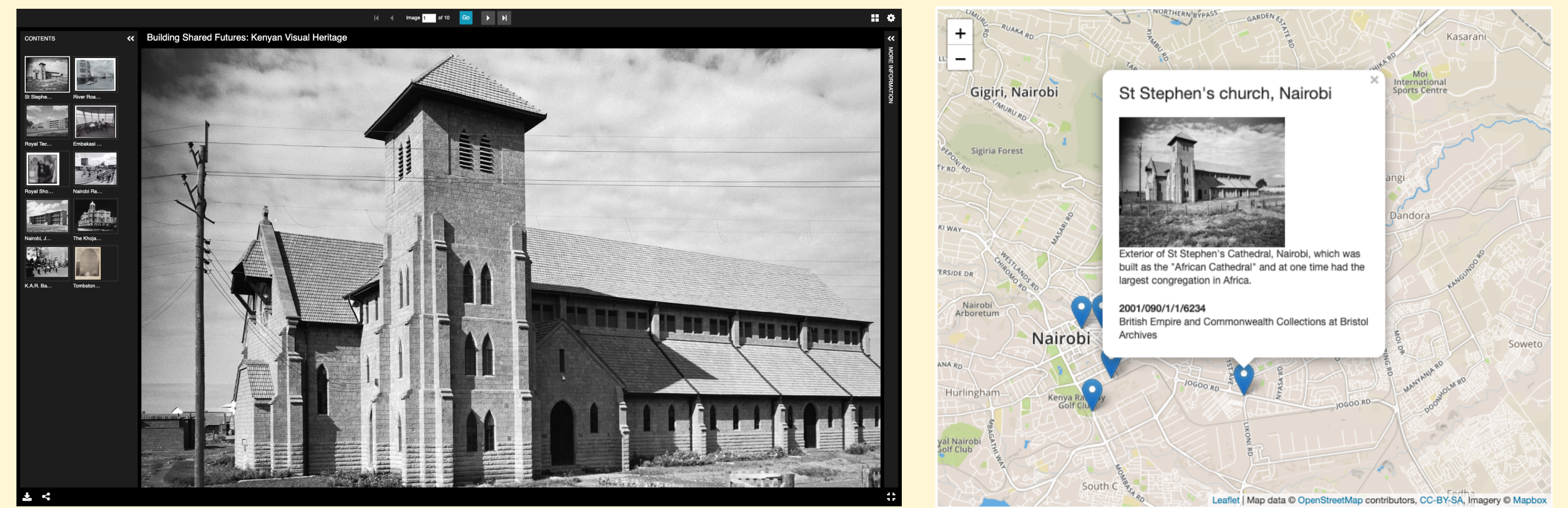
As part of the project, Chao Tayiana, a Nairobi-based photographer was commissioned to produce ten present-day photographs in response to ten historic photographs chosen by the Kenyan team. These now form an exhibition that will be displayed in Nairobi and Bristol.



Workshop held in Nairobi, June 2019.

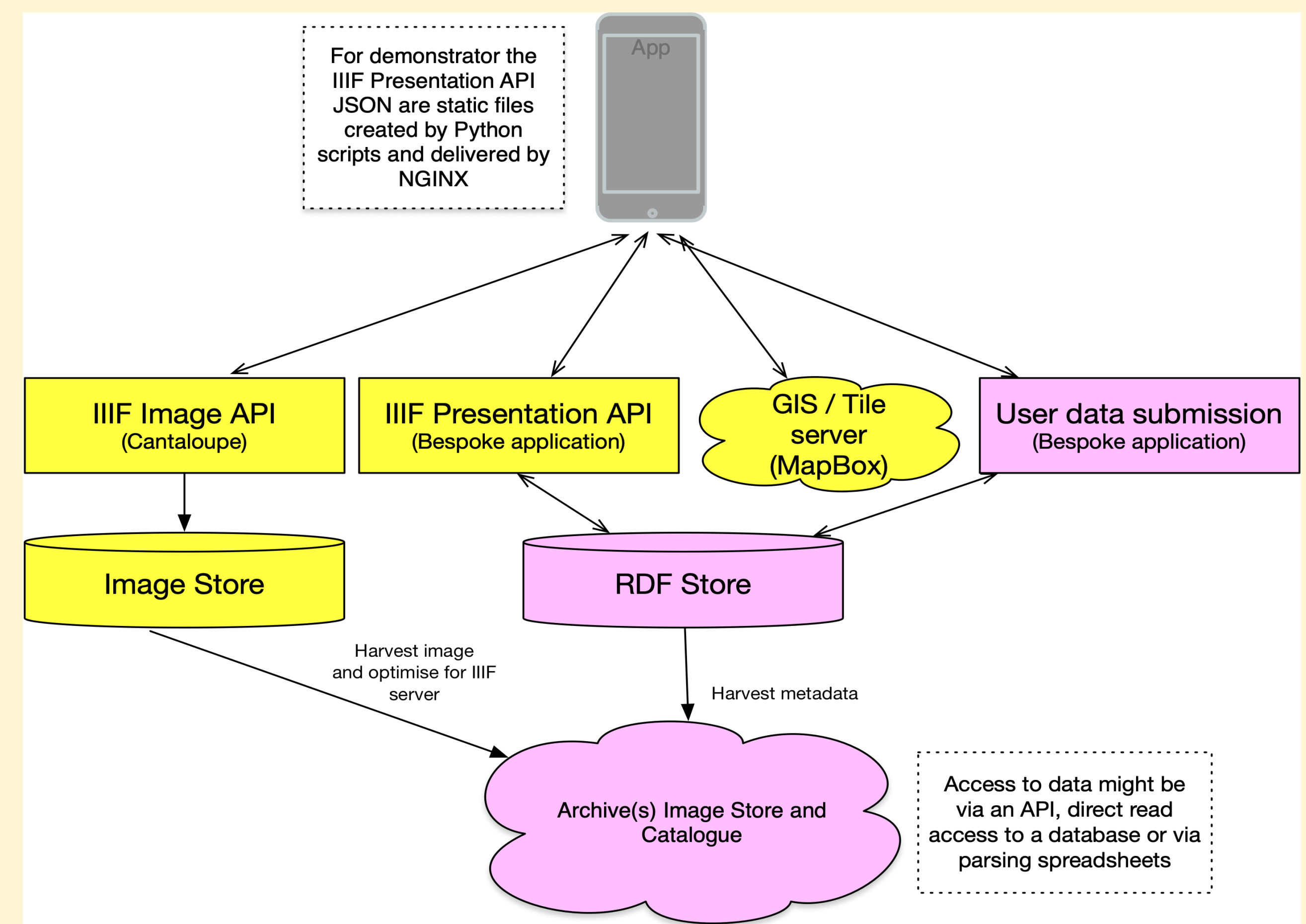
Technology

Research IT at the University of Bristol created small demonstrators to illustrate the potential of the International Image Interoperability Framework (IIIF) as a mechanism for delivering digitised images from the archives, including embedding them in maps.



St. Stephens Church, Nairobi (Bristol Archives, 2001/090/1/1/6234) shown in the Universal Viewer (<http://universalviewer.io/>) and displayed within the context of map.

A larger project might leverage the power of Linked Data to aggregate metadata from multiple archives, including those of Bristol and Nairobi, to provide a search and browse over geographically dispersed collections, while soliciting submissions (images and comments) from members of the public.



Architecture of a possible future solution. Yellow components were implemented or partially implemented in the demonstrators.

Postcolonial Digital Humanities?

Roopika Risam, in *New Digital Worlds: Postcolonial Digital Humanities in Theory, Praxis, and Pedagogy* (Northwestern University Press, 2018), warns that projects such as *Building Shared Futures* are in danger of being a 'mirror of a colonial world-picture' and thus providing 'another representation of colonized subjects from a colonial perspective that authorizes imperialism' (p. 50). To counter this, *Building Shared Futures* is a partnership of equals, incorporating academics, archivists, curators, technologists and community activists that will co-design workflows and tools around digitisation and crowdsourcing that are adapted to the Kenyan digital economy equipping Kenyans to reappropriate the materials to tell the histories of their communities. Besides *Building Shared Futures* has also incorporated an academic study that is a response to this imperial 'world-picture'. A member of the group is studying the perceived African identities that are represented especially in the Huxley collection in order to respond with a present day view of these same identities – an answer to constructed imperial identities.